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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000404

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV BM NLD

SUBJECT: SPDC CELEBRATES ARMED FORCES DAY, NLD HAILS

RESISTANCE DAY

REF: A. RANGOON 206

1B. RANGOON 16

1C. 03 RANGOON 398 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: On March 27, the SPDC celebrated the 59th Anniversary of Armed Forces Day with a traditional military parade, sundry speeches lauding the accomplishments of the modern Burmese Army, and an official state dinner complete with a now-standard depiction of Senior General Than Shwe as a heroic Burmese king. There were no reports of security incidents and the day passed quietly. Meanwhile, the political opposition, absent Aung San Suu Kyi and others who remain under house arrest, held parallel commemorative events attended by several hundred supporters who honored Burma's resistance fighters and founders of the independence movement. End Summary.

12. (U) The SPDC celebrated on March 27 what is perhaps its most significant holiday of the year, Armed Forces Day. The day was originally known as "Resistance Day" and commemorated Aung San's decision to throw Burmese Army support behind international forces allied against the Japanese. Ne Win changed the name in 1962 to "Revolutionary Day," but the holiday has been referred to as Armed Forces (Tatmadaw) Day since implementation of the 1974 constitution. The SPDC makes only passing reference to the historical origins of the holiday and now uses the occasion to glorify the exploits of the Burmese Army and to re-emphasize the necessity of military control as a means of ensuring national unity.

13. (U) This year's military parade was standard fare: thousands of well-drilled troops on display for regime leaders and invited guests, including foreign military attaches. Senior General Than Shwe made brief remarks and, in a thinly veiled threat directed at the democratic opposition and their supporters, called on his "comrades" to "repulse courageously whatever dangers that threaten the nation." He made no reference to the SPDC's road map, but gave the regime's generic defense of its 1988 coup, stating that "the Tatmadaw was compelled to assume the responsibilities of the State as the people were faced with a generally deteriorating and extremely critical situation." Unlike last year's celebrations, marked by several bombings, the day passed quietly and reportedly without incident (ref C).

14. (C) The SPDC's Big Three (Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Khin Nyunt) appeared to be in good shape and high spirits at an official dinner held at the military's HQ complex in northern Rangoon. Than Shwe chatted extensively with a visiting Japanese veteran, Shigemoto Okuda, who had trained Aung San, Ne Win, and the other "Thirty Comrades" early in WWII. When the DCM commented to Than Shwe on cooperation experienced during a recently concluded WWII remains recovery operation, the Senior General did not wait for the translator to interpret, but replied, "Yes, I am glad to hear that." Maung Aye, absent during the military parade earlier in the day and rumored by some to be ill, seemed relaxed, had a firm handshake, walked briskly, and otherwise looked hale.

15. (SBU) Besides some members of the diplomatic and defense attach corps, the official dinner included several hundred senior members of the military, government, and the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). After a hurried dinner, the guests were "treated" to the SPDC's standard after-dinner cultural fare, including the now-obligatory video transformation of an image of an early heroic Burmese king into the smiling visage of Senior General Than Shwe.

16. (C) As on recent holidays (refs A and B), the democratic opposition held several parallel commemorative events. The NLD honored 63 surviving war veterans who had served under General Aung San during WWII and the subsequent independence movement, and issued a five-page statement that called for national reconciliation and a transition to democracy. Several hundred party members, supporters, and U.S. Embassy officers attended the event, which was held at unofficial party headquarters (the modest Rangoon house of CEC member Than Tun). Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD's other top leaders,

in attendance at a similar event last year, remain under house arrest.

17. (SBU) Later in the day, the Veteran Politicians hosted a dinner to celebrate Burma's resistance movement. Several hundred veterans, NLD and other opposition party members and leaders, and representatives of the democratic ethnic groups (UNLD, UNA) attended the subdued affair. As during the NLD event earlier in the day, U.S. Embassy officers were the only members of the diplomatic community in attendance. Military intelligence (MI) agents were on the scene and organizers reported no unusual harassment or intimidation, although MI officers had earlier in the week warned the NLD not to hold Resistance (Armed Forces) Day events as they would "jeopardize talks between the SPDC and the NLD."

18. (C) Comment: We asked several of the elderly veterans who attended political opposition events, decked out in their medals honoring bravery and military service, if they had attended any of the SPDC's official functions. They chuckled and said that in order for veterans and other national heroes to attend the Armed Forces Day parade, they must submit applications weeks ahead of time requesting invitations. In the words of one NLD leader, "The Tatmadaw has attempted to hijack our holiday; however, as we celebrate "Resistance Day" we honor not only our past, but our present as well."

Martinez